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ABSTRACT

Graphic design is a form of communication by which visual messages are conveyed to a viewer. Audience needs and views must steer the design process when constructing public service visual messages. Well-educated people may be better able to comprehend visuals which require some level of interpretation or extend beyond their world view. Public service communication, however, often targets less-educated audiences, and designers must minimize the challenges or barriers to the audience's reception of the message. In discussing world views, it is important to remember that background and accumulation of experiences differs for each person, and an audience compares all messages against their stored images. Although effective visual communication may be developed through a variety of creative techniques, the lack of creativity in educational materials is a noted reason for their ineffectiveness. It is contended that design elements, through the use of color, line, shape, etc., can express world views by producing a responsive emotional effect in the recipient by a visual stimulus. Sociovisual and ethnovisual elements make an image familiar and comfortable. In a society that is becoming more and more dependent on images, the visual efficacy of images will become increasingly critical. Educators must recognize and capitalize on recipients' unique world views, so they can effectively respond to their needs and accomplish educational goals. Seven figures illustrate socio- and ethnovisual images. (Contains nine references.) (Author/MAS)

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Visual Dialect: Ethnovisual and Sociovisual Elements of Design in Public Service Communication

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Carole B. Schiffman

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Graphic design is a form of communication by which visual messages are conveyed to a viewer. Critical to the communication process are the needs and visual perceptions of the viewer, for without them, the sender, or designer, has no defined message or visual language within which to transmit the message. Graphic designers, however, tend to generate public service materials with little regard for the needs or the unique visual world of the target audience. As a result, their products may be ineffective and, in the case of public service materials, critical health and safety information may be lost.

For purposes of social communication, graphics is a vehicle for communication, first, aesthetic reflection, second, and personal expression, last. Graphics for social communication may be seen as creative in that the designer must not merely express an individual world view, but must also recognize, incorporate, and express the world views of the audience to create new ways to resolve unique visual problems.

World views

Audience needs and views must steer the design process when constructing public service visual messages. Educated audiences, who are usually more verbally and visually sophisticated than those who have had limited access to educational opportunities, may be better able to comprehend visuals, such as culturally clever or abstract concepts, which require some level of interpretation or extend beyond their world view. In fact, advertising seems to capitalize on this by creating highly clever slogans and concepts that challenge sophisticated viewers by breaking through the information clutter to captivate and persuade them.

Public service communication, however, often targets less educated audiences who may be unable to undertake such challenges or too bogged down by other challenges of adjustment to take another one on. Therefore, designers must minimize challenges, or barriers, so that the audience will receive the message. Bertoline (1991) notes that the goal of the technical graphics designer is to enable the user to understand the visual product. Similar to technical graphics, public service graphics are designed primarily to inform or communicate by visual means.

When forms exists within the

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world view of the designer but outside that of the recipient, communication may not take place. "The receivers' sophistication, or the relationship between the levels of sophistication of the conceiver and receiver, can moderate the encounter."

--Blasko and Mokwa, 1986

Thus, the absence of common frames of reference or levels of sophistication may limit communication.

In discussing world views or images, Forsdale (1981) notes that the background and accumulation of experiences differ for each person. Individuals from different cultures, therefore, see the world differently, comparing all messages against their stored images. "These images shape the meanings that we assign to everything" (Forsdale, 1981). It follows, then, that designers must adjust their perspective or view in order to recognize meanings within images in the same way that the audience does. They must react to the design elements that create these images as they are filtered through the social and cultural experiences of the viewer. Then, appropriate and useful visual communication solutions may be developed through the deliberate application of a variety of creative techniques.

Creativity in educational materials design

Couch and Miller (1991) note that instructional materials are often ineffective because they lack creativity. As part of their strategy to enhance creativity, Couch and Miller (1991) emphasize looking at things from new perspectives, a notion akin to the world view described by Forsdale (1981), i.e., being open to surprises and seeking multiple solutions by considering all alternatives. By constructing visual messages from the user's perspective, the designer will produce new solutions by using appropriate elements of design. As a result, communication will be more effective through the creative act of assuming a new perspective.

Bertoline et al. (1991) note that technical graphics education discourages creativity. Although apparently true, the extensive editing techniques they describe, requiring that the designer continually view things from other perspectives in order to achieve clarity of communication, are routinely used by designers of technical graphics and, based on definitions of creativity by Couch and Miller (1991), are inherently creative. Such characteristically creative orientations harness the abilities and foster the natural creativity of technical designers. Public service graphic designers would benefit greatly by using these same audience-driven technical design methods to create effective products.

Unlike technical designers, graphic designers are encouraged to be creative. However, in their search for innovation, they sometimes seem to equate creativity with obscurity. Such obscurity may be understood only by a select few who share the artist's particular interpretation of the problem or view of the world. As Forsdale (1981) observes: "We attend to communication that interests us or meets our needs, tuning out communication that doesn't; we perceive communication in ways congruent with our assumptions and needs." Effective communication, therefore, must be based on an

understanding of the educational needs and visual perceptions, or world view, of the target audience.

Design elements as expressions of world view

Pettersson (1993) recognizes that a collection of visual elements (line, value, shape, color) when brought together may interact to form complete meanings through images. Such design elements may be manipulated to control and enhance messages (Bertoline et al., 1991; Burton and Wiley, 1990). However, different visual elements and their expressions of these can, as Schwartz (1973) might so aptly state, "strike a responsive chord" and "resonate" with different populations (Schwartz, 1973). The critical factor here is not the intellectual matching of facts between sender and receiver to evoke meaning, as in Forsdale's (1981) stored meanings within images, but the production of a responsive emotional effect in the recipient by a visual stimulus, also based on their world view.

Consider the sea of pastel colors and soft edges in the baby department of a retail store, the saturated hues of stained glass in a Roman Catholic cathedral, and the crisp, flat shapes in open spaces that brighten Japanese tea rooms. These distinct visual elements create a feeling independent of meaning that resonates with the intended user. These palettes of elements represent visual cuisines. A variety of dishes may be prepared within one cuisine, but a common theme of flavors ties them together, with preferences, or choices, by age, gender, and class.

We might call these visual fields of experience of the recipient the "sociovisual" and "ethnovisual" elements of design. They are the elements (color, line, shape, value) as they are affected by social (age, gender, class) or cultural (racial, religious, regional) influences. This "visual dialect" is to the target population what sociolinguistics is to language. When the palettes of elements and their chosen combination reflect, describe, and express the social and cultural world of the audience, they are appropriate and may be most effective.

Sociovisual and ethnovisual elements make a piece familiar and comfortable. Unlike the images themselves, they are reflected in the way those images are expressed as a collection of elements. They are the socially and culturally influenced language, or dialect--accent, intonation, inflections, colloquialisms, idioms, and vernacular. Curtiss (1991) contends that analogous aspects exist within verbal and visual languages.

Collections of characteristic sounds uttered in a foreign language do not produce a comprehensible language with meanings, but they do elicit a distinct overall feeling for the cultural presence. Similarly, collections of sociovisual and ethnovisual elements elicit a feeling for a social or cultural presence without communicating meaning within a visual language. Images are often meant to convey meaning, whereas elements often describe the boundaries of how those images will be expressed and may convey feeling independent of meaning.

Visual dialect describes the aggregate of the expressions of elements which compose the visual language. Whereas style fits a product into a mode, or classifies it, visual dialect describes it, creating a feeling of the mode through manipulation at its most elementary level. Style may refer to anything from a period of time (Renaissance or Baroque) to a

movement (Cubist or Minimalist). Dialect is solely dependent on the expressions of the elements and the emotional response, or affinity, of the viewer to the collection.

The health posters in Figures 1 through 4 are all targeted toward the same cultural group, African Americans, but are worlds apart socially. Close visual dissection reveals that each has a background of soft lines of pastel colors swirling behind images of African Americans of different ages engaged in various social activities. Yet each carries the same overall feel. The colors (blues and yellows), values (pastels), direction (circular, swirling), and line (softened), however, are the same. Even type style is the same: slogan in black sans serif, text and tag line in black serif. Since typefaces are design elements in themselves, it seems logical that they should be appropriate for their intended audiences, perhaps composed of bold, wild elements for teenagers and highly contrasted, larger styles for older adults.

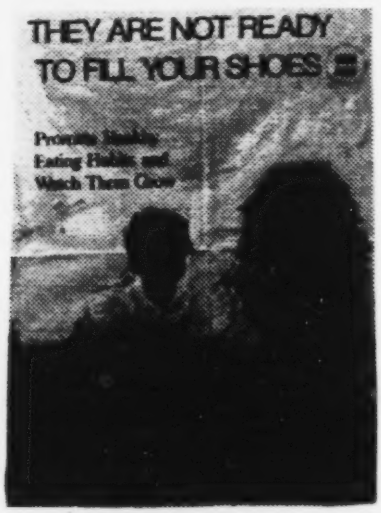

Figure 1

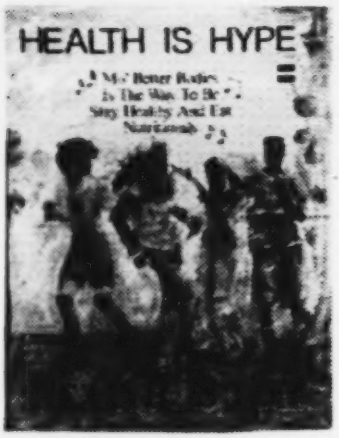

Figure 2

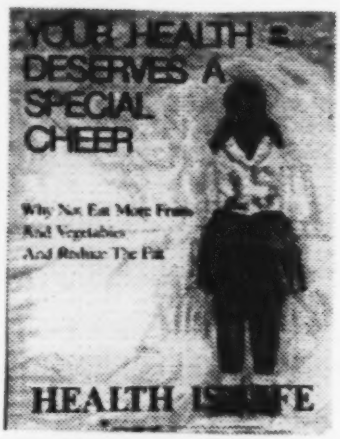

Figure 3

Figure 4

Figure 2, the "Health is Hype" poster, shows a wild image of teenagers dancing in a nightclub. The image and the nature of teenagers as they express themselves and choose to relate to the environment contrasts sharply with the soft colors and controlled movement of the painted lines of the background. Would teenagers be attracted to such a classical, European style of illustration?

We might question whether the impressionistic style and pastel palette used on all four posters would be effective for such different social groups. Is the impressionistic feel African-American, or is it the designer's personal taste? Do we encounter this classical, impressionistic feel in African American churches, homes, clothing? Would a visual dialect derived from kinte cloth, for example, be less discordant within this visual environment? The visual style may vary, but the dialectical elements can be extracted and carried through.

Furthermore, as with many ethnic groups, African-Americans are defined by rich, unique, visual cultural expressions. Designers must capitalize on these links to effective visual communication.

It is critical to remember that, as Forsdale (1981) notes, we selectively process those images that reflect who we are. Clearly, children, teenagers, the elderly, and young mothers exist within radically different worlds; each will be drawn toward radically different images and, consequently, visual elements; and each requires an individual design based on an individual world view.

Figure 5, targeted toward poorly educated Mexican American women, gives a graphic representation of the following public health message:

> A health alert for pregnant women. Soft cheeses can be harmful to your unborn baby. Use cottage or hard cheeses instead.

Figure 5

Illustrated by a highly simplified drawing of half of a black and white skull and cross-bones on a yellow background, it is essentially composed of four dominant shapes: a piece of a long bone, the right half of a pear-shaped skull, one round, black eye socket, and half of a triangular, black nose socket. This collection of lines and shapes is highly abstract to the point of being obscure. Does this combination of elements successfully communicate the message to eat hard rather than soft cheeses while pregnant? Not only must the image be recognized as a skull and cross-bones, but it must carry the same meaning to the viewer as it does for the artist. This is all compounded by the fact that the meaning of death hardly communicates the complex health message intended, even for the most sophisticated of viewers. Even more primary, would this

palette of design elements (line, shape, color) resonate visually with the intended audience? Would these expressions of the basic design elements -- the look, the feel -- be attended to by the audience? Do they conform to or conflict with the visual environment?

Figure 6

Figure 6 represents the same health alert; however, the image is framed by more traditional looking Mexican design elements. Brightly colored in saturated purple, blue, pink, and orange, with geometric zig-zag shapes, this image of a young, pregnant woman reaching for hard yellow cheese, and a plate of soft cheese within a red circle with a line through it, is based first on the communication need. Inherent in this case is a clear sense of purpose, or function, based on the world view of the user. This view dictates the visual dialect, which guides the composition of the design elements within the piece. Specifically, user-appropriate form (visually familiar elements and subsequent imagery) is applied to user-driven function (educational need). This marriage of form and function should be comfortable, or visually ergonomic, for the user.

Summary and conclusions

Designers must meet the viewer on the viewers' turf. The challenge is not how to actively captivate the audience's attention, but how to make the information easy to comprehend and absorb; so unobtrusive as to fit in, or blend into the viewer's world rather than barge in. If done well, vital health and safety educational materials, especially for special populations, should present no challenge for the viewer to comprehend.

If we lay all the visual elements, or design variables (texture, color, shape, size, line, value) on the table, challenge and restate each of them by using our audience's visual dialect, we may render new creative views that are compatible with our audience's world view rather than our own. Bertoline et al. (1991) note that technical graphic designers must manipulate graphic elements in order to communicate as clearly as possible.

Graphic designers must recognize the sociovisual and ethnovisual elements of design which comprise the visual dialect of their audience. By dissociating themselves from their personal world views and remaining open to using their audience's visual dialect, designers may generate new images or ideas from different perspectives.

Visual editing can help create a better draft--a better starting point after focus group research and before field testing.

As with written stories in which clarity of communication is enhanced by editors, a similar process of visual editing is needed for design, perhaps by art directors. However, visual editing must go beyond such basic tenets of design as balance, color theory, and Western aesthetics.

In a society that is becoming more and more heavily dependent on images, the visual efficacy of print images will become increasingly critical. We must recognize and capitalize on our recipients' unique world views, particularly as the population becomes increasingly diverse, so that we can effectively respond to their needs and accomplish our educational goals.

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FIGURE LEGENDS

Figure 1. Department of Health and Human Services and The Urban League. Young African American cheerleader.

Figure 2. Department of Health and Human Services and The Urban League. African American teenagers dancing.

Figure 3. Department of Health and Human Services and The Urban League. Elderly African American men playing a game.

Figure 4. Department of Health and Human Services and The Urban League. African American children trying on adult shoes.

Figure 5. U.S. Food and Drug Administration, unpublished. Half skull and cross-bones image.

Figure 6. U.S. Food and Drug Administration, unpublished. Pregnant Hispanic woman eating a taco.

Figure 7. U.S. Food and Drug Administration, unpublished. Hand with names of cheeses printed in Spanish on palm.